

# Lessons From the Practice

## Depression, Fatigue, and Memory Loss

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The disheartening emptiness of my early days in practice was vicariously remedied by an occasional night on call that I took for an elderly friend. This physician was literally adored by his patients. I was particularly impressed by how often he remained the physician in charge of three generations of the same family, even long after members of those generations had stopped talking amicably to each other.

One day I was having lunch with my benefactor in a hospital cafeteria when he called out to an approaching physician: "Where have you been all this time? The last time I saw you, you really looked run down. Thank God, now you look great. Tell us what happened to you."

The other physician sat down and, after a round of introductions, told us his story.

"I am well now, but I did not have an easy time. It started several months ago with a vague feeling of fullness in my epigastrium and bouts of really explosive diarrhea. Needless to say, I tried a number of remedies. They were ineffective. My concern and worry escalated. I felt depressed, moody, and irritable. When I developed paresthesia in the fingers I decided to behave like a grown-up and stop this "do-it-yourself" medicine. When my physician told me that all my blood tests were normal, that he found no cause for alarm on an upper gastrointestinal study, and that there was no occult blood in my stools, I felt reassured. He told me that I was depressed, and I could not deny that: he knew I was going through a divorce. It was not surprising that he should conclude that my complaints were psychosomatic.

"After the divorce became final I felt somewhat better, but improvement was very brief. The numbness spread up my legs and began to involve the saddle area. I began to notice a tight feeling in the chest when breathing. I felt short of breath. I lost interest in work and in patients. I also lost my stamina. I had to drag myself in order to function, but I was not anemic. After another battery of tests and a myelogram, I was given a clean bill of health by another friend who attributed my hyperventilation and my other indisputably psychosomatic symptoms to my mother's death.

"Then I came to realize that not only had my mood changed, but also my memory was failing. I could not recall familiar phone numbers or the punch line of a joke I was about to tell. The ominous thought that I could be developing serious brain pathology was frightening, but I

literally panicked on the day my ankle went limp. I missed the brake pedal, and I almost killed myself in a crash. Suspecting a brain tumor, the very next morning I flew east to my alma mater.

"Once there, I immediately consulted an old friend of mine who had become a leading internist. He found that I had developed a florid peripheral neuritis. He drew a blood sample right in his office, and it turned out that, for practical purposes, that was all that was needed. Accustomed to examining the blood smear himself, he had immediately noticed my hypersegmented polys.

"Thereafter every study corroborated his presumptive diagnosis of atrophic gastritis with pernicious anemia. And several things I had known about suddenly became explicable: my achylia gastrica, found incidentally many years ago during a physiology exercise; my more recent glossitis that I had blamed on a dentifrice used to clean my dental plate; and the curious ridging and flattening of my nails. How my body had managed to function without gastric acid for so many years and why my pernicious anemia developed so late is certainly a mystery. What is not a mystery is that pernicious anemia starts as a sensory neuropathy which, if recognized and treated, never goes on to the spastic ataxia that characterizes subacute combined degeneration."

Eager to show off my medical knowledge, I asked, "So did your friend start right away giving you vitamin B-12 every day while counting your reticulocytes?"

He smiled and said: "Well, no. He had never seen a peripheral neuritis of nutritional origin as florid as mine. So he convinced me that as a token of gratitude to my alma mater I should donate a piece of a peripheral nerve to their permanent collection of pathology slides. Treatment started after the biopsy was completed."

He then described the dramatic and overpowering feeling of revitalization he experienced within days of starting vitamin B-12 injections and the incredible speed at which he recovered normal mentation and recall capacity. He lamented his mistake of consulting colleagues who had stopped looking at blood smears and who, familiar with his personal plights, could not resist the lure of psychosomatic explanations.

"Oh no!" the elderly family physician interjected, "Your real error was not consulting me in the first place. I give all my patients B-12 shots!"

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